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SUBJECT: ETHNIC POLITICS IN GUINEA - GENERAL BACKGROUND

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. This cable is the first in a series of reports exploring the role of ethnicity in Guinean politics. Guinea has been widely seen as a violence-averse, tolerant country in which various ethnic groups have been able to live together peacefully, avoiding the inter-ethnic conflicts that have ravaged some of its neighbors. However, as the president's health wanes and various actors anticipate an eventual grab for power, ethnicity seems to be playing an increasingly prominent role in Guinea's complex political dynamic. This first report provides some general background on Guinea's ethnic groups as well as some comments on the role ethnicity has played in Guinean politics in the past.
END SUMMARY.

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR ETHNIC GROUPS

¶2. (SBU) Guinea encompasses four main ethnic groups, which roughly correspond with the country's four natural regions. There has not been an official census in more than a decade, but the common perception is that the Peuhl (Fulani) ethnic group of Middle Guinea (also known as the Fouta Djallon) is the largest group, representing approximately 40% of the population. The second largest group is the Malinke of Upper Guinea, representing approximately 30% of the population. The Soussou of Coastal Guinea comprises approximately 20% of the population. The remaining 10% of the population encompasses a number of smaller tribes, most of which are based in the Forest Region, and are generally referred to as the "Forestiers," or "Forest People."

¶3. (SBU) Although each region is identified with a specific ethnic group, extensive inter-marrying and migration have blurred ethnic lines. It is common to hear someone described as "Soussou by birth, but Peuhl by culture" or "Malinke by birth, but Soussou by culture." It is not unusual to meet a Malinke person living in the Forest Region just as it is not unusual to meet a Soussou living in the Fouta Djallon. Conakry, which is considered part of Coastal Guinea, is an ethnic melting pot with significant numbers of people from each ethnic group. However, many of Conakry's neighborhoods are specifically identified with one ethnic group or another. For example, Hamadallaye and Bambeto are considered Peuhl while Matoto and Sig-Medina are Malinke.

SHARED TIES ACROSS BORDERS

¶4. (SBU) Further complicating the issue is the fact that most ethnic groups transcend international borders. As Guinea's borders are highly porous, citizens claiming neighboring nationalities frequently transit back and forth across the borders, as do a number of Guineans. Ethnic groups related to the Malinkes or the Peuhls are living in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Mali while many of the Forest

tribes are connected to tribes in neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia.

GUINEAN FIRST

15. (SBU) Since becoming independent 50 years ago, Guinea has been widely seen as a violence-averse, tolerant country in which various ethnic groups have been able to live together peacefully, avoiding the inter-ethnic conflicts that have ravaged some of its neighbors. Observers have attributed this phenomenon in part to the legacy of Sekou Toure (a Malinke), a notorious Guinean dictator believed responsible for tens of thousands of deaths over the course of his regime (1958-1984). People from all ethnic groups were reportedly killed indiscriminately, prompting citizens to develop a sense of "Guinean-ness" as everyone had suffered equally and therefore had a shared history.

MAINTAINING ETHNIC BALANCE

16. (SBU) Toure's regime was followed by a military coup that installed General Lansana Conte (a Soussou) as president. Conte has been seen by some as a shrewd manipulator who has successfully played the larger ethnic groups off of each other in order to maintain his own grasp on power. The Soussou group has certainly benefited from Conte's regime with many Soussous occupying key government positions over the years. At the same time, Conte has also appointed

CONAKRY 00000600 002 OF 002

members of other ethnic groups to high-level positions in order to maintain some degree of ethnic balance. This strategy may have helped minimize inter-ethnic conflicts.

17. (SBU) The current assortment of ministers and high-level officials in the Conte administration helps illustrate how the president balances ethnic issues. Prime Minister Souare is a Peuhl, as are a significant number of his ministers. However, the Minister Secretary General of the Presidency, Alpha Ibrahima Keira, who may now be one of the most powerful officials in government, is Malinke. Old guard Soussous are scattered throughout the ministries. This balance is not accidental. Every time there is a new government, Embassy contacts are quick to analyze the ethnic balance, and just as quick to criticize any perceived slights to one group or another.

ETHNIC POLITICAL PARTIES

18. (SBU) Conte's ruling party, the Party for Unity and Progress (PUP), is generally seen as one of the most ethnically balanced political parties, although it may include a proportionally higher number of Soussou members. Opposition party Union of Republican Forces (UFR), under former Prime Minister Sidya Toure, is seen as more balanced than most, but with strong support from the Peuhls. However, the rest of the major opposition political parties are closely identified with a specific ethnic group. The Rally for the Guinean People (RPG) is predominantly Malinke while the Union for Guinean Progress (UPG) draws significant support from the Forest Region. The Union of Guinean Democratic Forces (UFDG) and the Union for Progress and Renewal (UPR) are competing heavily for Peuhl constituents.

ETHNICITY AS A POLITICAL TOOL

19. (SBU) As the president's health wanes and various actors anticipate an eventual grab for power, ethnicity seems to be

playing an increasingly prominent role in Guinea's complex political dynamic. It is difficult to talk to contacts about the political situation without someone bringing up the issue of ethnicity one way or another. Many of the country's intellectuals maintain that serious ethnic tensions do not really exist in Guinea, but that political leaders are using ethnicity as a tool to manipulate others, often to serve their own individual interests. However, the fact that these "manipulations" have appeared to be fairly effective suggests that the issue is becoming more problematic than it has been in the past.

¶10. (SBU) Over the coming weeks, Poloff will be meeting with various organizations and individuals in order to develop a better sense of how ethnicity may be influencing Guinean politics as the population prepares for an eventual political transition.

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